

Addressing challenges in the practice of critical literacy in EFL classrooms: A new framework

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ABSTRACT

The practice of critical literacy in EFL contexts answers the need for EFL pedagogy that considers the complex social and political dimensions of foreign language learning. Many teachers are still discouraged from practicing critical literacy due to the many challenges they encounter. In this paper, we outline a practical framework that can help teachers navigate the complexity of practicing critical literacy in EFL contexts. The framework consists of four resources of critical literacy practice, namely curriculum and standards, students' experiences and background, local social issues, and text selection. The classroom activities include text analysis and critique, bridging the word and the world, and social action. Particular issues in EFL pedagogy are addressed with implications for the practice of critical literacy.

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INTRODUCTION

Although the notion of critical literacy has been around for a long time, it was only adopted into the context of EFL/ESL in the 1990s (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Wallace, 1995) and flourished in the early of the twenty-first century (Fajardo, 2015). Its potential to address the social, political, and economic complexity of second/foreign language learning (Pennycook, 1990) has motivated many EFL teachers to practice critical literacy in their classrooms. The belated embrace of critical literacy by ESL/EFL education can be explained by a separation between the learning of English and critical literacy (Fajardo, 2015), teachers' primary focus on helping students become proficient in English (Keneman, 2016), and teachers' politically neutral standpoints (Gómez Jiménez & Gutierrez, 2019; Pennycook, 1990).

Frameworks of critical literacy developed by scholars have contributed to the increasing number of

practices in EFL settings. They have been helpful particularly in translating the complex concept of critical literacy into practice. Such frameworks as Freebody and Luke's (1990) Four Resources Model; Lewison et al. (2002) Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy; and Jones' (2006) Framework of Critical Literacy have been popularly used in EFL/ESL contexts (e.g. Gustine & Insani, 2019; Hayik, 2015a, 2015b, 2016; Huh, 2016; Kuo, 2013; Y. J. Lee, 2017; Mahecha, 2018).

However, these frameworks do not really address the complexity of critical literacy practice in the classrooms, such as the non-inclusion of critical literacy in the curriculum (Huh, 2016; Lau, 2010, 2019; Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2015), teachers' lack of knowledge and understanding of critical literacy and how to effectively practice it (H. Cho, 2015; Gustine, 2018), and the pressure of national standard tests (H. Cho, 2015). Additionally, being not created with EFL contexts in mind, they do not address the

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specific challenges of critical literacy in EFL contexts. Some of the problems particularly found in EFL settings include the issue of ethnocentrism within the context of multiculturalism (Keneman, 2016), students' and teachers' bilingualism or multilingualism (Lau, 2019), and a greater focus on English skills (Huh, 2016).

Attempts have been made to tackle the challenges. To address the problem of ethnocentrism, Keneman (2016) for instance proposed that the critical literacy approaches to EFL instructions can empower students to see their status as non-native speakers and their bilingualism/multilingualism as an advantage instead of a disadvantage in learning about foreign language and literature critically. Based on practitioner-action research, Huh (2016) formulated an integrated approach to teaching EFL students, combining skills-based and critical literacy instruction through critical reading. Regardless of their significant efforts, Keneman's (2016) proposal and Huh's (2016) integrated approach only partially address the problems in EFL critical literacy practice. Furthermore, C.-J. Lee (2013) claimed, "While critical literacy has been intensively researched and become widely known in academia, it does not seem to take root in the classrooms" (p. 96), creating a gap for a classroom-based framework of critical literacy. In this paper, we outline our attempt to address the complexity of EFL classroom practices of critical literacy using our proposed framework developed based on our analysis of the challenges EFL teachers encounter in their classroom practices.

Critical literacy: Definitions and its place in EFL contexts

Defining critical literacy is important to avoid misunderstandings that are commonplace among teachers (H. Cho, 2015; Gustine, 2018; C.-J. Lee, 2013). As C.-J. Lee (2013) noted, many teachers confused critical literacy with critical thinking and other terms coupled with the word critical, such as critical reading and critical writing (H. Cho, 2015). While critical thinking is important and related to critical literacy (C.-J. Lee, 2013), it only makes up one of the foundations of the latter. Whereas critical thinking is more concerned with evaluation of "the credibility of texts or . . . problem solving" (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 757), critical literacy encourages students to strive against social injustices (Shor, 1999; Soares, 2012) by inviting them to unravel ideologies in text and every day's use of language (Jones, 2006) to question social constructions of identities (Luke, 2012; Shor, 1999), with the ultimate goal of creating a more just world through literate practices (Vasquez, 2017).

Based on the definitions of critical literacy, we come to an understanding that critical literacy promotes a view of the non-neutrality of literacy and text (Bacon, 2017; Comber, 2001; Foley, 2017; Hendrix-Soto & Mosley Wetzel, 2018). Literacy as

well as its practice is socio-culturally and politically situated, and as such it bears some economic ramifications (Luke, 1995b). The mastery of English, for instance, has strong economic consequences which further expand what entails as being literate in countries where English is not the first or even second official language. Critical literacy thus plays an important role in inviting students to think more critically about the hierarchy of languages (Keneman, 2016; Lau, 2019) and/or domination of certain cultures.

Keneman (2016, p. 91) further elaborated the affordances of practicing critical literacy in EFL contexts, namely, to encourage students to:

1. Move beyond initial stereotypes they have about the target culture;
2. Express themselves creatively in the target language;
3. Engage in a variety of tasks of self-expression (speaking and writing) while aware of cultural context and knowledge;
4. Identify and use certain language features that are particular to certain textual genres;
5. Self-reflect on their experiences as learners of another language (Hasan, 1996);
6. Develop their voices within the context of the target culture;
7. Communicate appropriately in a range of contexts in the target language;
8. Not only decode the foreign language and related cultural practices, but also analyse and *challenge* characteristics of these practices.

The outlined objectives suggest how critical literacy can empower EFL learners in the face of their subjective positioning to the target language and culture, in which they may feel linguistically and culturally inferior to English language and culture, without sacrificing the communicative goals of English learning.

METHOD OF FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

The proposed framework has been developed based on an extensive and systematic review of the literature on critical literacy and its development and the classroom practices of critical literacy in the context of language learning (Novianti et al., 2020). To situate the framework into the specific EFL setting, we reviewed classroom practices of critical literacy in EFL contexts reported in peer-reviewed journal articles within the period of 2012 to 2019 and analyzed them thematically (Garner & Ragland, 2015; Guest et al., 2012). Subsequently, qualitative meta-analysis (Schreiber et al., 1997; Timulak, 2009) was applied in our attempt to contribute to the existing knowledge and theories of critical literacy based on our analysis of the practices.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Review of the frameworks of critical literacy in EFL settings

Based on the thematic review and meta-analysis of the classroom practices of critical literacy in language learning contexts (Novianti, Thomas, & To, 2020), we found that there were three frameworks popularly used in the EFL settings. We also found that not all practices used a particular framework, which in some cases caused teachers to use the term critical literacy interchangeably with other terms such as critical reading (Dehbaneh et al., 2018; Ibrahim, 2015). The three popularly used frameworks are described as follows.

The Four Resources Model

Freebody and Luke's (1990) Four Resources model is one of the earliest frameworks that help translate the theory of critical literacy into practical classroom instruction. This model proposes that there are four principles necessary for critical literacy practice to take place. They are breaking the code or the text, participating in the interpretation of the text, using the text for one's own purposes, and analysing and critiquing the text (Freebody & Luke, 1990). As the four practices suggest, this model places a heavy emphasis on the awareness of meaning-making in text, text analysis and critique, and using text critically.

Luke (2000) noted that this model was originally intended for beginning learners. Indeed, Freebody and Luke's (1990) Four Resources model has been popularly used with beginning EFL readers (Gustine & Insani, 2019; Huh, 2016; Y. J. Lee, 2017). Most of the practices employing this framework implemented the four principles as stages that scaffold learners in the meaning-making, use, analysis, and critique of text.

The Four Interdependent Conceptual Dimensions

Janks (2000) proposed this framework to comprise four interdependent conceptual dimensions of power, access, diversity, and design/redesign. Janks' (2000) framework necessitates for the four dimensions to be included in the critical literacy practice to make sure the achievement of its main goal of social transformation. Similar to the previous model, Janks' (2000) model also places a strong emphasis on text analysis, while still heeding to other social discourses relevant to students' global and local contexts.

This framework suggests that text holds power. Hence, the practice of critical literacy should give students access to the power embedded in text through an acknowledgement of diversity of voices and points of views and by providing them with "alternative perspectives for reconstruction and transformation" (Janks, 2013, p. 224) to design and redesign text for the main goal of social transformation. The last dimension, design and redesign, resonates with the theory of multiliteracies

(The New London Group, 1996), stressing the production of multimodal texts by students (Janks, 2006). Janks' (2000) framework is more abstract and conceptual in nature. Therefore, her framework is more popularly used for the analysis of critical literacy in relation to a complex concept such as translanguaging (Lau, 2019).

The Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy

The Four Dimensions of Critical Literacy was developed by Lewison et al. (2002) and subsequently revised by Lewison et al. (2008). This framework was synthesised from a large number of definitions of critical literacy in the span of 30 years. Similar to Freebody and Luke's (1990) model, this model was popularly employed in EFL classroom practices of critical literacy (e.g. Hayik, 2015a, 2015b, 2016; Kuo, 2013). There are also four principles to this model: "disrupting the commonplace, interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on socio-political issues, and taking action to promote social justice" (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 382). This model adds the dimension of social (justice) action to the classroom practices of critical literacy.

Jones' (2006) Framework of Critical Literacy.

Jones' (2006) framework of critical literacy consists of deconstruction, reconstruction, and social action. Text, again, remains a critical part of the practice. This model suggests that for critical literacy to take place, teachers should encourage students to deconstruct a text and reconstruct it. Once students are able to do the deconstruction and reconstruction, they will be aware of the social and political ramifications of texts and be inspired to take social action. Mahecha (2018) combined Jones' (2006) framework with the "switching" activity (an activity involving students switching, e.g., a character's identity to see how the text will change) proposed by McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) to her university students enrolled in a reading comprehension course.

As the review suggests, the existing frameworks have translated some of the key tenets of critical literacy into practical activities, such as developing students' critical perspective (Vasquez et al., 2019) and stance through critical engagement (Bacon, 2017) with text and encouraging social or transformative action (Janks, 2014). However, the frameworks do not address the challenges teachers face in their classroom practice. In their practice, teachers are bound by certain curriculum, standards, policies (Cho, 2015; May, 2015) and other instructional guidelines which are not infrequently exerted on them (Neophytou & Valiandes, 2013). Norris et al. (2012) and Cho's (2015) studies, for instance, demonstrate how teachers were discouraged to enact critical literacy because of the binding curricula, limited resources and time, and the pressure of standard tests.

Within the specific EFL settings, the frameworks thus fail to acknowledge the fact that

critical literacy is not explicitly included in the EFL curriculum (Huh, 2016; Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2015). Consequently, teachers have to find a way and a space to incorporate critical literacy into their instruction. In some EFL contexts, this situation leads teachers to treat critical literacy as an add-on to the curriculum (Fajardo, 2015; Huh, 2016), an activity that they can do if they have met the instructional goals for a unit.

The existing frameworks also do not comprehensively include the key tenets of critical literacy practice. Freebody and Luke's (1999) text-based approach is, as the categorization suggests, largely focused on activities with text to develop students' critical awareness of language. It does not include the dimension of social action, which according to Lewison et al. (2002) is frequently deemed "*the definition of critical literacy*" (p. 383, original stressing). Lewison et al. (2002) framework thus adds this dimension into their framework, a move followed by Jones (2006) in her framework. Nevertheless, particularly in EFL setting, we see that the key tenet of localisation is missing.

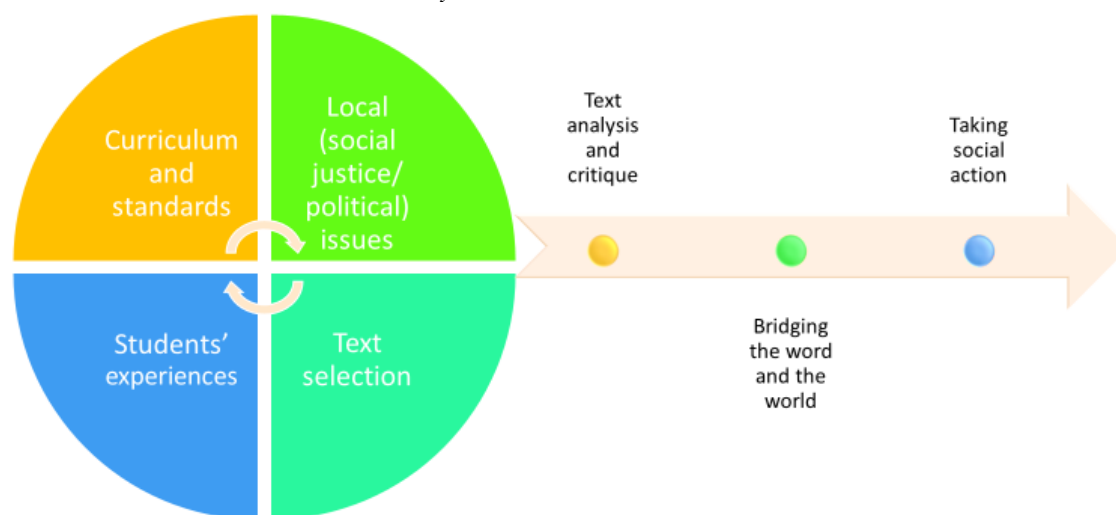
Derived from our qualitative meta-analysis, the concept of localities refers to the consideration of local contexts, students' awareness of their local communities, and students' literate experiences in the practice to create meaningful activities encouraging students to become agents of change in their community. Localizing the practice of critical literacy is important in at least two ways. First is that it makes the practice meaningful and relevant to

students' real life experiences as suggested by Freire's critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/1993/2005). Comber (2006) argues that students' consciousness of their local space can be a good resource for teachers to teach critical literacy that raises issues that are relevant and matter to students. Second, the concept of localities is an answer to the assertion of many scholars that critical literacy should be locally contextualized (Alford & Jetnikoff, 2016; Vasquez et al., 2019; Vasquez et al., 2013). Meanwhile, in practice, many teachers enact critical literacy remotely from their students' here-and-now contexts.

Based on these findings, we formulated a new, practical framework for teachers to enact critical literacy in their classrooms.

Figure 1 shows the four components of critical literacy practice resources consisting of curriculum and standards, students' experiences, local social (justice/political) issues, and text selection. We included the component of curriculum and other instructional standards to acknowledge the fact that teachers' classroom instructions are guided and bound by curricula, syllabi, test requirements, and other guidelines (H. Cho, 2015; Huh, 2016; Ibrahim, 2015; Neophytou & Valiandes, 2013). The components of students' experiences and local issues are the practical translation of the concept of localities mentioned earlier. Finally, text selection is also included as one of the resources as an acknowledgment to its vital role in critical literacy practice (Janks, 2014, 2018; Luke, 1995a, 2012).

Figure 1
A Practical Framework to Critical Literacy



As also shown by Figure 1, the suggested activities for the critical literacy practice in the classroom include text analysis and critique, bridging the word and the world, and taking social action. In agreement with the theories and previous frameworks, our framework places a strong emphasis on creating "awareness of the language and idea systems that are

brought into play when a text is used" (Freebody & Luke, 1990, p. 13). It also acknowledges the importance of encouraging the development of critical stance in students towards the text and transferring the critical stance into that of the complex social and political systems governing students' lives (Lewison et al., 2002). The

importance of transferring the critical stance towards the social systems is captured in the activity of bridging the word and the world. Finally, the classroom-based framework concurs with the previous ones in the ultimate goal of critical literacy to encourage students to be agents of change (Janks, 2014) by taking social action (Jones, 2006; Lewison et al., 2002) in their local and global communities.

Situating the framework in EFL contexts

The framework is originally designed for the general practice of critical literacy. In this section, we will show how the framework can be applied in EFL contexts. Whilst considering the complexities of classroom practice of critical literacy in general, the framework will also take into account the particular characteristics of EFL contexts, including the non-inclusion of critical literacy in the curriculum, local (cultural, political, and social) contexts, power relations between learner's language and the target language, and the tension between language skills versus critical literacy skills.

The four resources of critical literacy classroom practice

The classroom-based framework proposed necessitates the consideration of four important resources of critical literacy in designing the practice. The cycle of resources shown in Figure 1 also suggests that teachers may start from any the four resources in their planning or design of critical literacy. To borrow the term that May (2015) used, teachers should be "bricoleurs" who are able to use the various resources to enact critical literacy in their classroom. We strongly encourage teachers to navigate the four resources to meet the goal of critical literacy, being able to juxtapose, combine, and integrate the various resources to practice critical literacy effectively. Which resources to use, how much of the resources will be used, and how they shape the practice will largely depend on the varied experiences of the teachers (May, 2015).

Curriculum and standards

Being able to embed critical literacy in the existing curriculum is paramount to the enactment of critical literacy in EFL contexts. This is so because critical literacy is generally not part of the curriculum. It generally serves as an additional item to the existing curriculum (Huh, 2016; Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2015). Consequently, teachers should either embed the practice in their course unit (e.g. Chun, 2009; Gómez Jiménez & Gutierrez, 2019; Gustine, 2018) or create an extracurricular activity for the enactment (e.g. H. Cho, 2014; Hayik, 2015a, 2015b, 2016).

To embed critical literacy in the existing curriculum, teachers may choose certain units with the most potential to embed the practice. Some teachers in the literature reviewed chose a unit that particularly used certain texts, such as narrative

(Gustine & Insani, 2019) and literature, specifically poetry (Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016). The teachers saw the potential of these texts to teach critical literacy to their EFL students. Bobkina and Stefanova (2016), for instance, selected a unit on poetry because they believe in the potential of poetry to facilitate critical reading and critical thinking in the context of critical literacy pedagogy. Gómez Jiménez & Gutierrez (2019) chose a course unit that would allow them to explore various social justice issues through a wide range of multimodal texts to help cultivate students' analysis and critique of the social systems on gender construction. As the practices suggested, teachers were able to navigate the resources at hand and explore their potential for critical literacy practice.

Local social (justice) issues

Another important resource for practicing critical literacy, especially in the EFL settings, is local social justice issues. As suggested by Janks (2012), localizing the practice in students' immediate contexts and communities will make the teaching and learning more meaningful and engaging, and thus will encourage students to take action. Once teachers have determined in which unit in the curriculum they will embed critical literacy instruction, teachers can find any issue, problem, cultural event or phenomenon, and any other current happenings in the communities that can be raised as a topic relevant to the unit and curriculum. Teachers can, for instance, take the issue of healthy diet in the canteen, the use of mobile phones in school, bullying, and other issues that involve daily decision making and create possibilities for students to take action for change (Janks, 2012, 2014).

Based on the literature review, we found that some teachers raised local social issues that mattered and were relevant to their students. Hayik (2015a), for instance, started designing her critical literacy instruction by deciding on the local social justice issue that urgently needed attention, which was religious intolerance. She subsequently designed a unit of English with selected texts representing the issue. At the end of the lesson, the students created posters promoting religious tolerance that they exhibited in a public space. Hayik's practice demonstrates that raising local social justice issues in EFL critical literacy practice makes the practice more meaningful and relevant to students. At the same time, it shows students that they can use the foreign language, English, to address important issues in their local communities. In the view of Keneman's (2016) set of objectives of critical literacy pedagogy for EFL students, the practice has allowed students to "express themselves creatively in the target language" (p. 91).

Another example can be taken from the critical literacy practice of Y. J. Lee (2017) with four primary school children labeled as "resistant" readers. Y. J.

Lee (2017) read an English narrative with the topic of bullying with the children. In the discussion, he encouraged children to relate the issue to their own culture and to understand how bullying could happen in their culture in comparison to the one in the target culture. The children understood that bullying is a universal issue, but the forms and causes of bullying may be different from one culture to another. This understanding reflects one of the affordances of critical literacy practice in EFL context, which is to “engage [students] in a variety of tasks of self-expression (speaking and writing) while aware of cultural context and knowledge [and] . . . develop their voices within the context of the target culture” (Keneman, 2016, p. 91).

Students' experiences and background

Teachers should also take into account students' literacy background and experiences as a component of the resources and accommodate the different experiences in the practice, which admittedly can be very challenging (Christensen, 2017; Jowallah, 2015). As suggested by Gordon (2019), students' experiences are frequently ignored in critical literacy instruction. Many teachers, for example, randomly decided the issue to be raised in the classroom discussion and the texts to be analysed without even considering their students' backgrounds, let alone asking for their opinions. Curriculum demands, limited time, and a greater focus on communicative goals of EFL teaching (Huh, 2016; Keneman, 2016) may be some of the causing factors; nevertheless, ignoring students' experiences in critical literacy instruction betrays the student-centred nature that is at the heart of critical literacy pedagogy (Freire, 1970/1993/2005).

Informed by Freirean Pedagogy, critical literacy pedagogy strongly encourages teachers to not only listen to students' voices but accommodate their voices; they should work together with the students and learn from each other in the process (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Freire, 1970/1993/2005; Shor, 1999). In deciding an issue to raise in the practice, for example, teachers should always consider their students' previous experiences with the issue. One of the ways teachers can collaborate with students in the instruction is by inviting students to choose the text to read, topic to discuss, and project to take (Huh, 2016; Young, 2018). This way, students will feel that the instruction is meaningful and relevant to them.

Text selection

The last important component of the resources is text selection. Texts selected for critical literacy practice should be relevant to students' experiences, interests, and needs (Labadie et al., 2013). The texts should also be simultaneously enjoyable and challenging (Vasquez, 2004), able to elicit critical conversations with students. Equally important, the texts should adhere to the requirements stated in the curriculum,

such as having the required genre, topic, breadth, and length.

In the specific EFL contexts, the requirements are extended into finding texts that meet both the communicative goals and critical literacy goals (Gómez Jiménez & Gutierrez, 2019). In other words, the texts should be able to not only tick the communicative skills that students have to achieve but also raise students' awareness of social justice issues and encourage them to act on the issues. In addition, the topics addressed in those materials, as argued by Canagarajah (2005), should encourage students to appreciate the local cultures and values and view these as on par with the target language and culture.

Gustine and Insani (2019), for instance, in their critical literacy practice used Indonesian folktales written in English. The folktales were selected in accordance with the requirement of the prevailing curriculum that specifically mandates teachers to teach narratives and at the same time build students' characters in the larger context of Indonesian national character development. Using folktales did not only tick the curriculum requirements but also make the learning more relevant to students as most of them were familiar with the tales. The familiarity subsequently helped facilitate students' comprehension and critical analysis of the text, thereby making the practice of critical literacy effective. Importantly, the folktales serve as a negotiating site between the students' own culture and the target culture.

The four resources guide teachers in designing the topic and selecting the texts for critical literacy practice. The next thing to do is to plan the activities for text analysis and critique, making connection between text and students' lives and communities, and social action as the ultimate goal of critical literacy.

Classroom activities

Text analysis and critique

Similar to the existing frameworks, our classroom-based framework includes text analysis and critique as one of the most important activities in critical literacy instruction. The analysis and critique of text will help students develop their critical stance. Critical stance is important in order to empower students with the ability to see how text and knowledge is constructed for certain purposes (Janks, 2012).

To facilitate this activity, it is necessary for students to first comprehend the text. In the EFL contexts, comprehension is more highlighted because it is usually one of the main goals of reading lessons, and certainly it is more challenging given the text is in the students' foreign language. To help with building students' background knowledge, scaffolding can be used and read aloud will help make reading pleasurable (Chun, 2009) and engaging

for students. Freebody and Luke's (1990) Four Resources Model can be used in stages to scaffold students' comprehension to prepare students for the text analysis and critique (see e.g., Gustine & Insani, 2019).

There at least two important points to take note in helping students comprehend a text according to Freebody and Luke (1990). First is "the significance of the reader's having and using background knowledge resources in reading a text successfully" (p. 9), which is why in our classroom-based framework we have included students' background and experiences as one of the resources. Second is to cultivate an understanding of what entails comprehension to students by showing students that there are "versions of comprehension" which can be obtained through "personal reference and personal estimations of the characters' feelings and of what might happen next" (p. 9). The idea of "versions of comprehension" simultaneously suggests to students that text and its understanding is subjectively and socially constructed.

Based on other teachers' practices of critical literacy in EFL contexts, some of the activities that teachers can do with their students is reading text with multiple perspectives, such as a fairy tale and its revisited versions (Haydey et al., 2007; Tsai, 2010) and other texts offering multiple perspectives. As Freebody and Luke (1990) suggested, participatory discussion over text's authorship and readership is also highly encouraged. Students can also be invited to write a counter-narrative, such as rewriting a fairy tale from a different perspective (Chou, 2007; Culp & Hoffman, 1998) or rewriting other types of texts to gain more insights into authorship and readership.

With more sophisticated and older learners, teachers may use a more systematic approach to make students aware of the notion of authorship in the selection of certain language features and modes under the notion of genre (see, e.g. Harman & Simmons, 2014; Simmons, 2016). Alternatively, teachers may apply Critical Discourse Analysis for this activity (Karagiannaki & Stamou, 2018; Luke, 1995a). Similar to the four resources of critical literacy practice proposed in the classroom-based framework, teachers' choices of types of activities to include in their instruction will vary depending on their experiences (May, 2015).

Bridging the word and the world

To transfer the critical stance developed during the critical analysis of text to the social systems governing life in general, it is important for teachers to be able to facilitate connection between text and students' real life. Not only important in helping transfer the critical literacy skills from text to real life social systems, this component in the framework is necessary to reach the ultimate goal of encouraging students to reflect and more ideally take action on the local and global social justice issues.

Generally, teachers enacting critical literacy in their classrooms attempt to connect the text to students' personal lives (e.g. Gustine & Insani, 2019). Once this personal connection is established, teachers should move towards the social and political system that governs their individual lives and the community in general. To take an example, Hayik (2016) encouraged her EFL students to reflect on the gender issue represented by the fairytales they read in their personal life. Some of her students, all of them were female, gained some understandings of how gender inequality prevailed in their community and that the social construction of gender has to some extent put women in their community at a disadvantage. Although the budding understanding was not shared by the only male student in her class, Hayik's (2016) practice suggests that connecting what is in the text to students' personal life and the social system can develop students' critical stance towards the social construction in their community.

One of the most frequently cited problems with the practice of critical literacy with EFL students is teachers' assumption that their students' proficiency level will be an obstacle, in which students with lower English skills will tend to have lower critical literacy skills. Because of this assumption, C.-J. Lee (2013) argued many EFL teachers are discouraged from practicing critical literacy. Some researchers have sought to prove that the assumption is false. Ko and Wang (2013), for example, who practiced critical literacy with four EFL college students with high to low English skills reported, "each one of [the students] were able to engage in critical literacy practice regardless of their respective English proficiency" (Ko & Wang, 2013, p. 228).

Huh (2016) combined skills-based and critical literacy instruction to teach Korean EFL university students enrolled in a reading course. Using Freebody and Luke's (1990) Four Resources Model in stages, Huh (2016) alternated texts of different levels of difficulties, with the lower level ones to allow more space for students to analyze the ideological constructions in texts and the higher levels to enhance their English skills. The teacher-researcher admitted being more dominant in teaching by providing guidance to students throughout the process, arguing that "EFL readers needed guided ways to analyze the texts from critical perspectives", and that this domination will subside as "students seemed to progress from the receiver to negotiator, challenger, and discussant" (Huh, 2016, p. 233). The cited research suggests that students' low or varying levels of proficiency should not be an obstacle in practicing critical literacy.

Taking social action

Finally, in agreement with the existing frameworks, our proposed framework also views social action as the ultimate goal of critical literacy practice. This belief is shared by Luke (2012) who argued that the

main goal of critical literacy is to “transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (p. 5). Critical literacy practice in school is thus an avenue to create students who will act as “agents of change” (S. Cho, 2013) in their immediate communities and at the global level. Social action is admittedly difficult to achieve in critical literacy practice (Lewison et al., 2002; Luke, 2012; Luke & Sefton-Green, 2018; Vasquez, 2017). Only a small number of the classroom practices of critical literacy in EFL contexts reviewed included this dimension in their practice. Janks (2012) suggested the difficulty may stem from misunderstanding of what constitutes social action.

As shown by previous research reporting critical literacy practices, social action can take various forms. It can take the form of “small” action in the immediate surroundings of students but with a possibility to have repercussion at the global level. Social action may take the form of protesting against an author’s gender bias (Hayik, 2015b, 2016); penning a letter to magazines demanding they include more perspectives (Clarke & Whitney, 2009; Harwood, 2008); or writing a letter to the authorities to express concerns with social justice issues in their communities (Jowallah, 2015; Torres, 2017). Teachers can also create social action projects involving the use of multimodal texts. Some of the good examples include promoting religious diversity through posters (Hayik, 2015a); creating an artwork or caricature to voice criticism on certain issues such as water conservation (Janks, 2014); holding a photography exhibition to raise awareness of local social issues (Hayik, 2018); and posting tweets to criticize and question the social construction of gender (Kunnath & Jackson, 2019). The previous practices of critical literacy suggest how social action can take the form of a small step in students’ lives; a step that may lead students take a greater step in the global level.

CONCLUSION

Practicing critical literacy in EFL contexts is certainly challenging to teachers whose teaching practices are governed by curricula and other standards. In addition, the practice of critical literacy requires teachers to carefully consider students’ experiences and backgrounds and local social justice issues. The requirements mean that teachers will have to devote their time to design and practice critical literacy in their English instruction. The challenges are increased by such problems as big class size, limited time, and binding syllabi (Bartlett, 2009; Gutiérrez, 2015). However, Vasquez (2004) and Roy (2017) evinced that, with careful attention, educators can engage in critical literacy pedagogy and make instruction relevant to students within the mandated standards and curricula.

With regard to the complex power relations within the EFL classrooms, involving the relations of not just between teachers and students, but also between students’ language and culture and the target language and culture, critical literacy can help students make sense of and become critical towards the power relations. More importantly, critical literacy can empower EFL students to navigate themselves in the complex web of languages and cultures of their own and of the target language.

The classroom-based framework proposed in this paper offers a practical guideline for EFL teachers wishing to practice critical literacy. Although practical, the more practical, the framework serves as a general guideline that should be adjusted to suit teachers’ unique individual circumstances. As Vasquez et al. (2019) advised, in its practice, “‘critical literacy’ should look, feel, and sound different in different contexts” (p. 300).

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